

Active Voice and Passive Voice

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



A common misconception is that active and passive voice refers to whether a sentence is in the present tense (happening now) or the past tense (happened already). Rather than verb tenses, the phrases “active voice” and “passive voice” refer to the way in which a sentence is formatted in regard to the structure of its subject, verb, and object. When the majority of sentences within an essay are written in active voice, the entire essay is then said to be in active voice, and vice versa.

Sentence Structure: Subject, Verb, Object

Sentences must contain, at a minimum, a **subject** and a **verb**. The **subject** is who or what the sentence is about, and the **verb** is what the **subject** is doing.

*For example, “He yelled” is a complete sentence because it has a **subject** that the sentence is about (“He”) and a **verb** that the **subject** is doing (“yelled”).*

If the **verb**, or action, is being done to something, then that something becomes the **object**.

*For example, in the sentence “He threw the ball,” “He” is the **subject** and “threw” is the **verb**. Because “threw” is being done to “ball,” “ball” is the **object**.*

Subjects, **verbs**, and **objects** can all be more than one word or more than one person or thing. Even in these situations, the **subject**, **verb**, **object** arrangement still applies.

*For example: “My roommate is throwing the soccer ball.”
“My roommate and my friend threw soccer balls and footballs.”*

Active Voice

When the subject of the sentence is directly performing the verb, or action, of the sentence on the object, that sentence is in active voice. Active voice is generally preferred in writing, especially academic writing, because sentences written in active voice tend to emphasize the subject and are usually shorter and more direct.

*For example: “The Writing Center helped students.”
“Students like the Writing Center.”*

Even when sentences get more complex, the subject, verb, and object at their core can still help make a sentence active or passive.

For example: “The Writing Center helped me with my APA formatting.”

Passive Voice

In passive voice, subject, verb, object order is reversed (this is sometimes referred to as having the **subject** receive the action). The combination of a **verb** and the word ‘by’ often indicate that passive voice is being used. In some writing situations, passive voice can be preferable because it appears more objective and can sometimes be used rhetorically to avoid placing blame.

For example: “The soccer ball was thrown by my roommate.”

Active Voice and Passive Voice

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



In the previous example, the **roommate** is still the one doing the action, so “**roommate**” is still the **subject**. It is the arrangement of the sentence, in which the **subject** appears after the **verb**, that makes this passive. The same is true in the following examples:

“**Students** **were helped** by **the Writing Center**.”

“**The Writing Center** **is liked** by **students**.”

Passive voice can be used when the performer of the action is either unknown or implied.

For example: “**The essay** **was finished** [*by the student*].”

“**The famous Writing Center Pencil** **was stolen** [*by an unknown thief*].”

Making Passive Voice Active

To shift a sentence from passive voice to active voice, you just have to rewrite the sentence so that it is in **subject**, **verb**, **object** order.

For example: “**Students** **were helped** by **the Writing Center**” becomes: “**The Writing Center** **helped** **students**.”

“**The Writing Center** **is liked** by **students**” becomes: “**Students** **like** **the Writing Center**.”

In the case of an unknown **subject**, you can directly refer to the subject by indicating that it is unknown. The sentence: “**The famous Writing Center Pencil** **was stolen** [*by an unknown thief*]” implies the subject of “an unknown thief” by leaving the subject off of the sentence. By directly stating “unknown thief” as your **subject**, you can reorganize the sentence to active voice.

For example: “**The famous Writing Center Pencil** **was stolen** [*by an unknown thief*]” becomes: “**An unknown thief** **stole** **the famous Writing Center Pencil**.”